



## Godard in His "Fifth Period": An Interview

Katherine Dieckmann; Godard

*Film Quarterly*, Vol. 39, No. 2. (Winter, 1985-1986), pp. 2-6.

Stable URL:

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*Film Quarterly* is currently published by University of California Press.

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# Godard in His "Fifth Period"

## AN INTERVIEW

Jean-Luc Godard's *Hail, Mary* has been causing a stir. The modern retelling of the immaculate conception—with Mary as a sullen basketball-playing teen pumping gas in her father's station, Joseph as a sexually frustrated cabdriver, and the archangel Gabriel as an unshaven tough with a cherubic little girl spouting lines like "Be pure, be rough, follow thy way"—has rallied religious groups and scared distributors on our shores and abroad. From the Pope's Vatican Radio denunciations and Italian magazine covers depicting bare-breasted blondes on crucifixes, to Catholics lighting candles and shaking rosaries outside offending theaters, *Hail, Mary* is one of those newsworthy movies that sells itself on free publicity alone.

Expecting "the most controversial film of our time," audiences have been understandably disappointed. Yes, there is nudity and a brief, graphic quasi-masturbation scene overlaid with a juicily blasphemous Artaud quotation—but other than this, there's little subversive in the film. It's sedate when judged by the criteria of rupture and dissociation we've come to call "Godardian." Having located the ideal story of noncausality, Godard lets the tale itself critique the desire for explanation. This is a film where the birth of Jesus is no more than a few newborn cries set against an image of a snowplow, shot from the rear, chugging down a nocturnal winter road.

If one seeks a radical Godard, he is to be found in his video collaborations with Anne-Marie Miéville ("France-Tour-Detour-Deux-Enfants," "Sur et sous la communication," 1976-78, and the video scenario for *Passion*), just recently being shown in the States. Miéville, Godard's working partner of over fifteen years, contributed what Godard calls "a long short story" to his "short long story" with her *Book of Mary*, which prefaces *Hail, Mary*. A startlingly clear look at how a parental separation affects a precocious girl (Mary, who recites Baudelaire and externalizes anger via violent, freestyle dances), Miéville's short

is brilliant and assured. Though Godard claims that both films were conceived, written and shot separately, they are full of resonant affinities in imagery and idea.

*Hail, Mary* is meditative, serene. With its sumptuous nature photography, juxtapositions of bird sounds and Bach and somber entertainment of the presence of the inexplicable in our world, this is an extraordinarily soulful film. It is serious. And so, more or less, is Godard. He is patient when he explains, for the umpteenth time, why he asked his Italian distributor to pull the film from Rome: "It's the house of the church, and if the Pope didn't want a bad boy running around in his house, the least I could do is respect his wishes. This Pope has a special relationship to Mary; he considers her a daughter almost. There were other cities for the film. We didn't need Rome."

This is not a charged, mischievous Godard—though it's not necessarily a more honest one, either. He is if anything a more cunning and subtle dispense of "fictions." The historicized Godard of the New Wave, the new narrative, the newly politicized film-making of the late sixties and early seventies, is to be distinguished from the contemplative, middle-aged Godard—one closer to the mild-mannered, somewhat shellshocked patriarch figure he played in *First Name: Carmen*. Some say Godard has lost his punch. Others say he's simply traded Marxism for mysticism.

Godard sits alone in a plush room at New York's Park-Lane Hotel, puffing on what has become his trademark cigar. A French edition of Rilke's *Letter to a Young Poet*, a stack of newspapers and an unopened bottle of Jack Daniels are on the desk before him. His English is excellent. He speaks softly, sucking in a little breath of air at the end of his sentences which threatens to make the final words disappear. One hears in Godard's answers the desire for pared-down explanations, ones like Gabriel's response to Joseph during a scuffle in *Hail, Mary*. Joseph asks over and over why he may not touch Mary, and Gabriel, catching

his opponent in a stranglehold, shouts abruptly: "parce que! ("Because!")"

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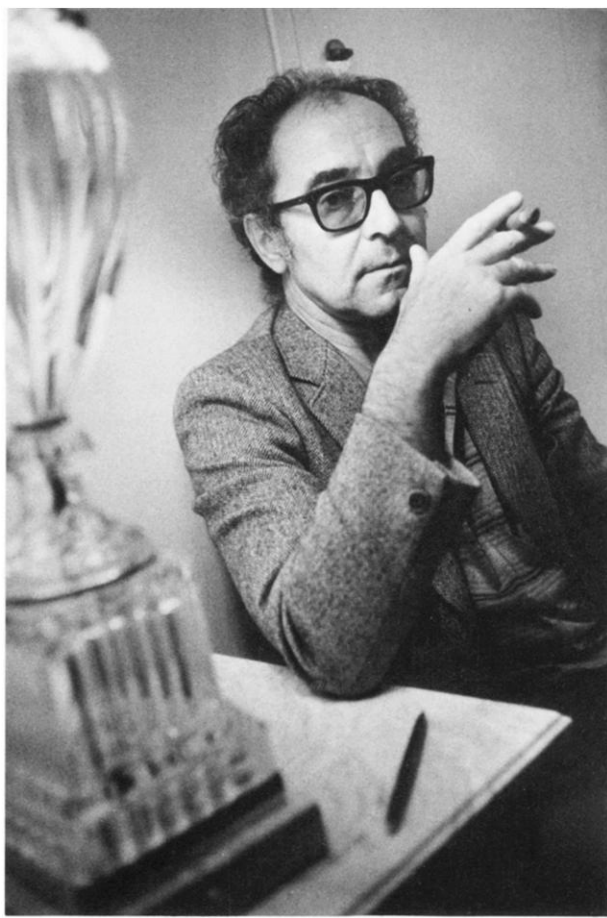
*Are you a Catholic?*

No, I was raised a Protestant, but I don't practice. But I'm very interested in Catholicism. I think there's something so strong in the way the Bible was written, how it speaks of events that are happening today, how it contains statements about things which have happened in the past. I think, well—it's a great book! And somehow I think we need faith, or I need faith, or I'm lacking in faith. Therefore maybe I needed a story which is bigger than myself. I like it that *Hail, Mary* is being really discussed. Instead of people saying, "Oh, it's directed by Godard," people are talking about the subject of the film first. Later they say, "It's by Godard."

*It's a sincerely spiritual film. What about it do you think is offending the Catholics most? The obsessive nudity?*

Probably. But you know, our purpose was to try and shoot a woman naked and not make it aggressive, not in an X-rated-picture way. There are several shots which have more the purpose of an anatomical drawing. Maybe the nudity's a bit much. It encounters the risk of becoming sinister. Or sin, even. Perhaps that's too big a word. But it was difficult to know how to show it. Very often in painting, the Virgin is depicted half-naked, or at least with the breast naked or revealed, because of the Christ child. This has always caused problems: in the time of Martin Luther, there was a great deal of opposition to Raphael, for instance. The German soldiers came to Rome and scratched up many Raphael paintings. They thought it was offensive, too much of a *Playboy* style of painting. In *Hail, Mary* I was trying to make the audience see not a naked woman, but flesh, if that's at all possible. And the difference between—a feeling of something fleshy. And we had thought of having Joseph be naked also, as we had a nude male in *First Name: Carmen*, but decided the audience wouldn't understand, they would immediately think Mary and Joseph were going to have intercourse. So it was absolutely impossible. And I'm a man, still, I like to look at women naked!

*You're dealing with this opposition between*



Jean-Luc Godard in New York. (Photo: Paula Court)

*science and nature, or logic and illogic, in this movie. The men are associated with the logical, the women with the intuitive. And you're using a very different set of symbols. Usually your films are full of quotations from popular culture, with bits of traffic signs, neon, advertisements, cartoons. The signs in Hail, Mary are very pure: a moon, a sun, water. Apples. Some of the images are even a little corny, like National Geographic photography.*

Well, women are more casual. They accept more things. Whereas men always feel they have to master, to understand. As for these symbols, we shot exactly like the old-time Walt Disney documentaries were shot. We set up a camera and were waiting, waiting, waiting until a certain time when you got the exceptional in everyday, natural things. I mean, we shot the sun, but we needed to have a plane cross the sun, and it doesn't happen every second! It's a one-time thing. That's why we went over budget with *Hail, Mary* and had to stop and shoot *Détective* to make some money, and then go back and finish



THE BOOK OF MARY: Anne-Marie Miéville's companion film to Godard's HAIL MARY.

*Hail, Mary*, which was very disruptive. I didn't want to make *Détective* at all, though I don't mind it now that I've done it. But it was an unwanted child, and then what do you do? You have to take care of it. What we wanted to show in *Hail, Mary* was signs in the beginning. Signs in the sense of signals, the beginning of signs, when signs are beginning to grow. Before they have signification of meaning. Immaculate signs in a way. And not just to give a feeling of nature, in order to be poetic, but to show the physical process of making nature possible. A philosophy of nature, just as we tried to show the spirit and flesh of Mary. Also to bring science close to the natural, not to show them as oppositions. Because there's a scene where the professor is talking about creation—the text comes from the work of a British physicist—and it sounds very Biblical or religious. We are an extra-terrestrial people, as it says in the film. We come from the sky. And it's not by chance, but by design.

*And you have so many images of the circle, in nature and elsewhere, which gives the movie a strong feeling of unity.*

Yes, the circle. We used it metaphorically: the woman as circle, and the plane flying toward it. That's one signal: coming to a woman's center. But at a certain point there's no difference between metaphor and actuality. I had no idea we'd shot the moon so many times, but then suddenly we had all these shots of the moon, and I discovered then that the moon was like the basketball in Mary's games. So it was the same: Mary was playing basketball with the moon.

*Tell me about the use of sound, because it's very complex.*

I try to work not with an idea of vertical

sound, where there are many tracks distinct from one another, but horizontally, where there are many, many sounds but still it's as though every sound is becoming one general speech, whether it's music, dialogue or natural sound. *Hail, Mary* had more of a documentary use of sound than other films I've done. It's simple in a way: there's dialogue, direct sound and music. The story was known, more or less. And I knew that the only music that would work would be Bach. I tried to put in all sorts of Bach: violins, church music, piano, choral. The picture could be described also as a documentary on Bach's music. And it couldn't have been Beethoven, or Mozart, because historically Bach was the music of Martin Luther. And as I was saying before, Martin Luther was attacking the Catholic church, specifically the way the Catholic church makes images. Probably in his time Bach was immensely popular, because his music was played in churches that had no heat, and it was probably very cold in church, and you needed a strong and passionate music. It's a strange thing, but if you have good speakers and play Bach very, very loud—even if it's just a smooth piano piece—it sounds like rock music. Bach's music can be matched to any situation. It's perfect. When you play it in reverse, it sounds almost the same. It's very mathematical. You could play it in the elevator, like Musak. It blends itself. Bach is the perfect musician for the elevator.

*Before you shot Hail, Mary, you said "It will be about what Mary and Joseph said to each other before having a child." Does this still apply now that the movie's done?*

Yes, exactly. What could they say to each other? It's a major problem, because from the Bible we know of only two or three words that Mary spoke, and from Joseph absolutely nothing. And they must have talked together! So it was difficult to invent the dialogue, because nobody knows.

*You've also said that one film always leads directly into the next with you. So how does the story of Carmen become the story of Mary?*

Well, Carmen leads to Mary, though of course they're very different. Carmen is more what men imagine women to be. And with Mary, it's more a matter that a man *can't* imagine what a woman is. And, of course,



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one story ends well and the other ends quite badly.

*What about your King Lear project with Golan and Globus? What do you think about working with producers in America who make mostly commercial, action movies?*

Well, *Lear* I'm not sure about yet. It's just a project at this point, and I'm going to do another movie in between, though that isn't decided either. I've never read it, you know.

*Oh, come on!*

I don't know much. I'm not a very good pretender. (Laughs) I just know it's about some old man and his young daughter, or three daughters, but one specifically. Of course I'll read it before I shoot. People tell me it's a great story, but it's just one I've heard of, like the story of Carmen or the story of Mary. I met Golan and Globus just crossing the street one day at Cannes. And they approached me. I'd never talked to them before. And we crossed the street together, and in crossing the street we made a fast deal. It's a very specific agreement, so I'm not worried about it. They are the only people now who aren't pessimistic about the future of motion pictures, and that's good enough for me. I haven't seen any of the movies they financed, but I really want to see the Chuck

Norris movie. I'll wait until it comes to Paris.

*Do you go to the movies a lot? I know when you were young and writing for Cahiers du Cinéma in the fifties you were notorious for spending all day in the cinema.*

No, no, I don't go very much at all. I have a feeling these days that just by knowing the names of the directors and actors involved, and by looking at the ads in the paper or on the street, I've already seen the pictures.

*Are you still living outside Geneva? And why did you choose to shoot Hail, Mary in Switzerland?*

Yes, I live in Switzerland, though I have a company located in Paris. I've shot there before—*Every Man for Himself* was shot in Switzerland, and parts of *Passion*. I've been there since my childhood. I was raised there, had family there, though I also have family in Paris. I've always been crossing borders. I belong to two countries, even if I have only one passport, Swiss. I choose Switzerland to shoot in because—I don't know, already I've used Paris and Parisian streets so much, in my earlier films.

*Let's talk about your work in general, or the way it's been periodized. In 1970 a lot of books came out dealing with your work on the sixties: there was this impulse to talk about*

Godard. And then in the seventies the image is that you drifted off, got involved in video and political projects. Then when *Every Man for Himself* came out in 1980 you described it as “your second first film.”

It works in periods of ten years, yes, because we live in a decimal system. We have ten fingers. So we always invent in periods of ten. Ten years after ten years. I’m past 50 now, so I speak of myself as being in my “fifth period.” I began shooting in 1960, I mean *really* shooting, and then in 1970 I changed more or less, and then in 1980 started up again . . . I’m very regular! Now it’s 1985. I have to wait until 1990.

*You’re at the midpoint of the third chapter, because now you’ve amassed an entire second set of feature films:* *Every Man for Himself*, *First Name: Carmen*, *Detective* and *Hail, Mary*.

I’ll use the same words as Picasso, not to compare myself to him, but because they fit. He said, “I will go on painting until painting refuses me and doesn’t want me anymore.” I’m trying to do this with motion pictures. To go until motion pictures refuse me. Not an audience, and certainly not the industry—the industry already did! But to go until the screen says: No. I had the feeling in making *Hail, Mary* that there was an immaculate screen, and it was saying to me, “Don’t stray too far, or don’t come too close. Or come closer. Or don’t come.” I had the feeling of a voice there.

*Have your working methods changed after 25 years of making films?*

I am closer to images now. Part of this comes from having worked in video, which I’m doing more and more. I use video to help me see and work better, because I can shoot something and see it immediately, all the while imagining a real screen behind. Video lets me look first, and then I can begin to write from what I see. Before—just like most movie-makers and industry executives—I always wrote first, and then let the image come. I would write about you: “She sat in the corner, she looked at me with such a face,” then I’d imagine the face and direct it. Now I look at you and imagine first, and take notes from that. Most people think they work only when the camera is rolling, but that’s not it. When the camera rolls, everything is done



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already. It’s like life. Take this hotel room. When two newlyweds enter this room, they know what they are going to do, they’ve written it before, in the elevator or on the street. And the real work’s been done on the street or in the elevator. Here’s the completion of the work: the camera’s rolling. Cinematographers shoot a movie, and then for six months they don’t touch a camera! What makes them think they’re still working when they’re not looking? Images are like life. And images can show you something in your life you don’t want to see, which is probably why people react violently to *Hail, Mary*. If you’re jealous, you don’t want to see the image of the other man or the other woman right away. Things like that. The image is something very strong when it comes at you. That’s why movies are so popular. But it’s not dangerous. A lot of people don’t want to go to the doctor. They don’t want to know what kind of disease they have, or how a disease might look. Maybe I can look because my father was a doctor. I was raised not to be afraid of certain categories of truth.